

Punctuation and Usage Part One

(COM 3222)

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About this Course

In this course, you'll learn about

- Grammatical conventions for capitalization
- Grammatical conventions for apostrophes

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Information



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About this CBT

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- Click the "CBT Content" button to select course modules.

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Introduction

Want to know the exact length of 36 inches? It's quite easy—just grab a yardstick. In fact, any two yardsticks should measure exactly the same.

What about language and grammar? What's the measuring rod for what's right and what's wrong?

There are dictionaries and writing guides, but they do not always agree like two yardsticks.

Which should be trusted when the texts differ?



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Acceptable Versus Correct

The English language is constantly changing, and we often don't know if we are using it correctly. Unfortunately, there is no single authority that establishes grammatical rules. However, there are accepted norms that you should follow in the workplace. The conventions of punctuation and usage covered in this course are broadly known as "acceptable and preferred" forms of grammar.

For a listing of the key learning points taught in the course, [click here](#). Also remember to try the Resources tab if you feel you are falling behind.



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Capitalization

Capitalization refers to using uppercase forms of letters (ABC), not the lowercase (abc). Following are some standard practices for capitalization.

Proper nouns are capitalized. Proper nouns name specific persons, places, things or events: **Charles Dickens, London, the Eiffel Tower, Halloween.**

Common nouns are not capitalized. Common nouns do not name specific persons, places, things or events: **writer, city, tower, holiday.**

Proper adjectives are capitalized: **Freudian, Texan, French.**



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Capitalization (continued)

The first person singular pronoun, "I," is always capitalized: **The dog and I went to the beach.**

The first word of every sentence is always capitalized: **He gave the assignment his full attention.**

The beach was cold; we should have stayed home.

The first word after the semicolon is not capitalized because it is not a new sentence.



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Quotes and Parenthesis

When using quotations, capitalize the first word of a complete sentence that is directly quoted. Do not capitalize fragmentary quotations.

I said, "The job is going to be difficult." (The quote is a complete sentence.)

I said that the job would be "difficult." ("difficult" is a fragmentary quotation.)

Do not capitalize parenthetical expressions (words, phrases or clauses that interrupt the thought of the sentence) or indirect quotations.

I said (did I tell you?) that the job would be difficult.

I said that the job would be difficult.



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Capitalization After a Colon

Writing manuals disagree on whether or not capitalization should be used after a colon.

Victor always carries two items: a pen and a stopwatch.

In the sentence above, the words that follow the colon do not form a complete sentence, so the first word following the colon should not be capitalized. However, when an independent clause follows a colon, either formation is acceptable.

One day Victor had a revelation: he should always carry a stopwatch.

One day Victor had a revelation: He should always carry a stopwatch.

While capitalizing and not capitalizing are both acceptable in this case, the key is to be consistent. Whatever rule you follow should always be followed in that article of writing.

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Capitalizing Names

Capitalize names of associations, organizations, government departments/institutions, and political parties: **American Bar Association, League of Women Voters, Department of Justice, Republican Party.**

Do not capitalize governmental institutions unless they are in the name of the organization: **Jim has not paid taxes in years and owes a lot of money to the state. BUT: Jim has not paid taxes in years and owes a lot of money to the Arizona Department of Revenue.**

Capitalize historic events, periods, movements, and documents: **the Civil War, the Middle Ages, the Civil Rights Movement, the Bill of Rights** (note: "the" is not capitalized).

Do not capitalize centuries, as in **sixth century, seventh century, 21st century**. Note: spell out first through ninth; use numerals for 10th and on.



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Geographic Areas

Capitalize specific geographic areas: **Southern California, the East Coast, Lake Erie is one of the Great Lakes.**

Capitalize specific geographic bodies: **the Great Lakes, Lake Erie, Tempe Town Lake.**

Do not capitalize general geographic bodies: **They left for the lake to go fishing.**

Do not capitalize compass directions or locations unless they refer to a specific geographical area.

Correct:

We traveled to the East Coast.
We took the southern route to Arizona.
Turn south on Central Avenue.



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Geographic Areas (continued)

Capitalize *county, city, town, village, etc.*, only when the word is part of the official name.

Correct:

We just entered Maricopa County.
Bullhead City gets boiling hot in the summer.
Oak Creek Village is lovely in the spring.
We just left Charles Town, West Virginia.

Note: Current usage is to lowercase *state, city, village, town, etc.*

Correct:

The state of Arizona is renowned for the Grand Canyon.
The city of Phoenix hosted the convention.
The town of Cottonwood is south of Flagstaff.



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Times and Seasons

Capitalize days of the week, months, and holidays:
Thursday, November, Thanksgiving.

Do not capitalize seasons of the year: **My favorite seasons are fall and summer.**



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Astronomical Terms

Capitalize the names of celestial bodies: **Mars, the Milky Way, the Big Dipper.** (Note: "the" is not capitalized.)

Do not capitalize descriptive astronomical terms: **rings of Saturn, moons of Jupiter.**

Do not capitalize **earth, moon, or sun** unless they are mentioned in the context of other bodies and not preceded by an article (a, an, or the).

Correct:

The earth revolves around the sun.

The moon is bright tonight.

Someday I will fly from Earth to Venus.



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Academics

Capitalize academic titles when they come before proper names: **Professor Eric Watkins.**

Do not capitalize titles when they follow the name: **Eric Watson, professor of English.**

Capitalize abbreviations of academic degrees: **Eric Watkins, Ph.D.**

Capitalize names of educational institutions, departments, courses and degrees: **Harvard University, Department of History, Political Science 101, Bachelor of Arts.**



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Academics (continued)

Capitalize course names when they are proper nouns. Proper nouns that can be found in academic disciplines include languages, ethnic groups, and geographical areas.

Correct:

I am taking English 101. She is majoring in African-American Studies. The college now offers a course in Middle Eastern politics.

Do not capitalize courses that are not proper nouns:
One requirement for a degree in physics is an introductory course in economics.



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Evolution of Proper Nouns

Sometimes proper nouns enter our language as a descriptor for another item. Over time, the use of the proper noun becomes so commonplace that it is no longer capitalized.

spanish omelet	Spanish omelet
french fries	French fries
danish pastry	Danish pastry



Which is correct?

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Evolution of Proper Nouns (continued)

Actually, both usages are acceptable. The key is consistency: If you write "Spanish omelet" once in a memo or on a menu, then it should always be capitalized in the same piece of writing.

brussels sprouts

diesel fuel

Swiss cheese

Waldorf salad

The conventions for using capitalization of proper nouns as descriptors can be confusing. Some, like the ones listed on this page, are fairly set in one style, while those examples like "french fries" can vary. The key is to maintain consistency within your writing and with accepted norms.



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Capitalize Certain Names and Titles

For titles of publications, speeches, and pieces of art, capitalize the first word and every "important" word thereafter. Unimportant words are usually short articles, conjunctions, and prepositions such as a, an, by, or, so, the, etc. In addition, italicize titles of books, magazines, and artistic productions.

The Comprehensive Guide to Grammar (book)

The Creatures of Prometheus (ballet)

Romeo and Juliet (play)

Sports Illustrated (magazine)

Gettysburg Address (speech)

Use quotation marks around titles of articles and chapters in books.

"Gov. Brewer announces new director of Racing Department" (newspaper article)

"Rules for Capitalization" (chapter in a book)

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Newspapers and Periodicals

Most style guides recommend an exception for the titles of newspapers and periodicals. If the first word of the publication is "the," it should be lowercase.

Dewey saw his name in the headlines of the Arizona Republic.

Although the proper title of the newspaper is "The Arizona Republic," the first word is often not capitalized. This convention likely came about because of the difficulty of knowing the actual title of all periodicals. Some newspapers have "the" in the title, and some do not.



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Position Titles

Capitalize position titles only when they appear as part of the person's name.

Assistant Attorney General Jane Doe represents several state departments.

The Director of the Department of Research recently retired.

Employee Relations Manager Jeff Smith developed the procedures.

Do not capitalize position titles when they follow a person's name: Jim Smith, project service evaluator, was named Employee of the Year.



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Relatives

Capitalize the title of a relative when it is used as proper name.

Michael said, "I visited Mother in the hospital."

Do not capitalize the title of a relative when it is used as a descriptive word.

Michael visited his father in the hospital.



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Relatives (continued)

Kinship names that follow a possessive pronoun (my, our, her, etc.) are usually descriptive words that are not capitalized. In general, capitalize the relationship title only when the person's name can be directly substituted for the word.

Let's go to Aunt Betty's house.

Let's go to my aunt's house.

You would not say, "Let's go to my Betty's house," and so the word is not a direct substitute and is not capitalized.



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Knowledge Check

Next, you will check your understanding of the material presented so far. Your grade on this section does not count toward your final course grade.

If you are not able to answer several of the questions correctly, or you feel you have not acquired a competency of the material covered so far, review the content of this chapter again.

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Knowledge Check (continued)

1. What is the correct usage in this sentence:

Nothing is better than your _____ Sarah's cookies.

- ☐ **Grandma**
- ☐ *grandma*

Submit Answer

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Knowledge Check (continued)

2. What is the correct usage in this sentence:

I'll stay with ____ if you will take Father to the doctor's office.

- ☐ **Mom**
- ☐ *mom*

Submit Answer

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Knowledge Check (continued)

3. What is the correct usage in this sentence:

Next Saturday will mark the last day of _____.

- ☐ **Summer**
- ☐ **summer**

Submit Answer

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Apostrophes

There are three uses of the apostrophe (uh-POS-truh-fee) as a punctuation mark that we will study:

- to indicate possession,
- to indicate omission, and
- to indicate plurality.

Perhaps the most common error in written English is the misuse of the apostrophe in certain pronouns.

RULE: Possessive pronouns NEVER take an apostrophe: its, yours, ours, hers, theirs.



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Contractions and Possessive Pronouns

We will begin with three groups, as using these words properly will correct most of the errors of the apostrophe.

its | it's
your | you're
their | they're | there



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Contractions and Possessive Pronouns (continued)

its | it's

One of these words is a contraction (a shortening of a word or words by an apostrophe), and one is a possessive pronoun.

its

This possessive pronoun shows ownership in the third person. "Its tail" means that the tail belongs to the dog. For example: **"A dog chases its tail."**

it's

This contraction is the combination of "it" and "is." The apostrophe shows the omission of the vowel. "It's raining" is equivalent to "it is raining." Another example is: **"I saw the cat, and it's afraid of the dog."**



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Contractions and Possessive Pronouns (continued)

your | you're

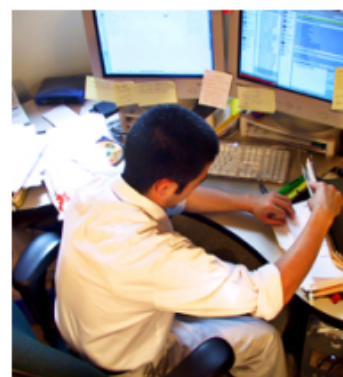
One of these words is a contraction and one is a possessive pronoun.

your

This possessive pronoun shows ownership in the second person. "Your car" means that the car belongs to you. Another example is: **"The boss thinks your desk is very messy."**

you're

This word is the contraction of "you" and "are." The apostrophe shows the omission of the vowel. "You're driving" is equivalent to "you are driving." Another example is: **"If you don't clean up, you're going to be fired."**



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Contractions and Possessive Pronouns (continued)

their | they're | there

their

This possessive pronoun shows ownership in the third person plural. "Their phones" describes phones belonging to them. Another example is: **"Give me their wallets."**

they're

This word is the contraction of "they" and "are." The apostrophe shows the omission of the vowel. "They're calling" is equivalent to "they are calling." Another example is: **"Be careful--they're on the way."**

there

This word can be many parts of speech, but none of them relate to possession or omission. The word usually appears as an adverb signifying place ("The train arrived there") or as a pronoun used to introduce a clause or a sentence ("There is no hope").



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Possession of Common Nouns

Now that we've covered the most frequent errors of the apostrophe, we can look at common punctuation guidelines for showing possession of common nouns.

Add 's to common nouns: **today's educated person;**
the dog's bone.

Add 's to plural common nouns that do not end in s:
men's room; mice's tails.

Add only an apostrophe to plural common nouns ending in s:
wizards' spells; dogs' bones.

If a plural common noun ending in s is followed by a word that begins with an s, add only the apostrophe: **for old times' sake; for goodness' sake.**



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Possession of Proper Nouns

Now we will look at common punctuation guidelines for showing possession of proper nouns.

Add 's to show possession of proper nouns that do not end in s: **Bill's boat; David's car.**

Add an apostrophe after a proper noun ending in s: **Charles' book; Mr. Gomes' mustache; Mr. Davis' snakes.**



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Apostrophe in a Series

Be careful about using the apostrophe in a series because it will show the difference between joint possession and individual possession.

Mother and father's house.

The house is owned by the mother and the father.

Mother's and father's houses.

The mother and father own separate houses.

In the first phrase, the house is owned by the mother and the father together; in the next phrase, the two own separate houses.



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Tone of Your Writing

We have covered the most common contractions, which are word constructions that have a letter (usually a vowel) or more omitted. One lesson to learn here is that contractions can affect the tone of your writing. In general, more formal writing will have fewer contractions than informal writing.

We don't have pudding. (less formal)

We do not have pudding. (more formal)

Either use is correct, but the acceptable tone of writing will be determined by your intended audience and subject matter.



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What Is Being Omitted?

You should also be aware of what is being omitted when you are forming a contraction with an apostrophe. For example, which of these expressions looks correct to you?

music of the 70's

music of the '70s

music of the '70's

[Show Answer](#)

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Avoid Confusion

Use the apostrophe to form plurals of letters and digits **only** when the meaning would be confusing.

Standard use:

He studied the times tables of 6s and 7s.

Tony learned his ABCs.

I love music from the '70s.

Exceptions:

He received four A's and two B's.

He knows to dot his i's and cross his t's.

He recited the rules for 1's and 0's.

The above examples show how the apostrophe helps avoid confusion. Without the apostrophe, the first sentence would include "As" and the second would include "is." Using an apostrophe is generally a good idea for lower-case letters and zeroes (which should be distinguished from the letter "O").



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Apostrophes and Periods

Finally, apostrophes form plurals for abbreviations when periods are present.

It was an intellectual party, filled with astute Ph.D.'s.

If the academic degree abbreviation ends in "s," use the apostrophe: Leo holds four M.S.'s.



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Knowledge Check

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Knowledge Check (continued)

1. What is the correct usage in this sentence:

The class was given a _____ guide.

- ☐ *participant's*
- ☐ *participants*

Submit Answer

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Knowledge Check (continued)

2. What is the correct usage in this sentence:

The gauge measured the exhaust of the _____.

- ☐ **car's**
- ☐ **cars**

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Knowledge Check (continued)

3. What is the correct usage in this sentence:

Life was so much easier in the _____.

- ☐ **1980's**
- ☐ **1980s**

Submit Answer

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